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Alcohol in excess offers strong temptations, and drunken writers have written eloquently about the ecstasy and despair. An on-the-wagon writer explores the ins and outs of addiction

Tangled up in booze

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

Wine cheers God and man.
– Old Testament: Judges 9:13

They who drink beer will think beer.
– Washington Irving

Reading the letters of William Burroughs, the Beat Generation's clinician of drug addiction, I was by turns fascinated and frustrated, absorbed and bored.

Burroughs – the cranky, all-knowing grandson of the inventor of the calculating machine – was forever filling off the wagon. To Jack Kerouac, he wrote in 1952: "I'm off the junk now, and likely to stay off since I kicked on the street where I could have scored for a barrel full. I was drunk for a month ... and wound up near dying from uremic poisoning. Now I am back on the three-cocktail-a-day schedule." A year later, he was on heroin again, "partly for my health," to cut out drinking completely: "Start cutting down tomorrow. With plenty codeine there's nothing to kicking a habit. Done it five times in the past two years." Four years later, he complained to Allen Ginsberg of "a vast, Kafkian conspiracy to prevent me from ever getting off the junk."

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

A dark, hallucinatory movie, The Lost Weekend starred Ray Milland (left) as a drunken writer. On the alcoholic ward at Bellevue Hospital, he's taunted, according to a 1945 photo caption, by a "sadistic male nurse."

And so it went. He never got rid of his habit. I closed the book, beat by a Beat's mordant obsession with drugs, but knowing I'll return to it sooner or later.

I'm still in the mood for dissolution, but maybe more humorous. I turn to legendary drinker Charles Bukowski. In Hollywood, his fictionalized account of the filming of Barfly, which he wrote, Bukowski has it down pat: booze, drunks, bars, fights, gutters, poverty, women, celebrity, the race-track, writing. His stuff goes down as smooth as a cold beer on a hot day, like this scene of the author besieged by reporters at his movie premiere:

"'Do you think drinking should be glorified?'

"'No more than anything else ...'

"'Isn't drinking a disease?'

"'Breathing is a disease.'

"'Don't you find drunks obnoxious?'

"'Yes, most of them are. So are most teetotalers.'

"'But who would be interested in the life of a drunk?'

"'Another drunk.'

"Do you consider heavy drinking to be socially acceptable?"

"'In Beverly Hills, yes. On skid row, no.'"

To an addict, "Know thine enemy" translates as "Know thyself."

Bukowski, I figure, is "Booze Lite." That I return so often to him and other besotted writers gives me pause. I'm not supposed to do this. I am a recovering alcoholic.

When I confessed my reading habits to a friend who is also on the wagon, he flashed a stern "Uh-oh" look. Reading about alcoholics and addiction in general, I rationalize, ultimately gives me a sense of "I don't want to go there again." To an addict, "Know thine enemy" translates as "Know thyself." It's dangerous territory, though. Despair can be as intoxicating, and addictive, as ecstasy. Reading about habits is tempting fate. Isn't that what drunks do? Recovering substance-abusers are warned to stay away from temptation. The Bible says so, as does the Big Book (the AA bible). But try telling an alcoholic that. Once a drunk, always a drunk. Drunks are liars, always armed with rationales: my girlfriend, my boss, whatever, made me do it – but I've got it under control. (Besides, didn't Burroughs and Bukowski survive nicely into ripe old age?)

Reading about habits is tempting fate. Isn't that what drunks do?

So I worry about immersing myself in tales of debauchery under cover of books. They take me to the edge without my actually going there, slumming in the spaces where I used to pass out standing. A 12-stepper would say I still haven't had enough, and he would be right.

Then again, popular culture is soaked with alcohol, from the clink of cocktails that go oh-so-swell with Cole Porter's ditties to the booze-fueled machinations of the primed-time soap Dallas. Our ambiguous relationship with booze is readily seen in the insolent language we've reserved for it. In his 1753 volume A Drinker's Dictionary, Benjamin Franklin listed 228 terms for intoxication. Today, slang linguist Paul Dickson has upped the ante to more than 2,500 synonyms – annihilated, bombed, crunked, embalmed, lubricated, polluted, wasted and whipped.

My first taste of alcoholism came vicariously as a teenager when I saw The Lost Weekend, starring Ray Milland as a drunk writer. The movie's dark, hallucinatory, existentialist, desperate qualities appealed to my adolescent spirit. Still do.

With its grimy Third Ave. bars, claustrophobic apartment and spooky Bellevue Hospital, this was the stuff of nightmares. Yet it was as compelling to me as the way vertigo draws me to jump.

"Most men lead lives of 'quiet desperation,' I can't take 'quiet desperation'," intoned Milland, echoing the mythic writer seeking the Holy Grail. He justified his alcoholism in technicolour terms to his bartender: "It shrinks my liver, doesn't it, Nat? It pickles my kidneys, yeah. But what does it do to my mind? It tosses the sandbags overboard as the balloon can soar. Suddenly, I'm above the ordinary. I'm competent, supremely competent. I'm walking a tightrope over Niagara Falls. I'm one of the great ones. I'm Michelangelo, molding the beard of Moses. I'm Van Gogh, painting pure sunlight. I'm Horowitz, playing the Emperor Concerto."

So I became a writer. Eventually, I started to drink, often heavily.

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Pauline's potty puts me in mind ...

It is not *nouvelle de la boue*, but the recent unfair attacks, in Montreal's bigoted anglophone press, on Pauline Marois's choice of human-waste disposal fixtures, that have evoked some of my own toilet memories.

In my Left Bank hotel in Paris, in 1960, I had to make do with squatting in the toilet down the hall, no more than a hole in the floor, with thoughtfully placed shoe grips for foot placement. If nothing else, such a no-saucer was certainly sanitary, but I'm awfully pleased that our esteemed health minister, patron saint of Quebec's nurses, does not have to cope with such a primitive facility. Clearly, she is a deserving person, the opposite of what my Concise Oxford Dictionary describes as a "piss artist" (Brit. vulgar slang), that is to say, "an incompetent or useless person."

Ooops, bound for Montreal on an Air Canada flight from London, the man in the seat next to me left for the toilet. After he was gone for a half hour, I grew anxious. I got up to have a word with a stewardess. "I think you should unlock that door," I said. "Possibly the guy's having a heart attack."

"No way," she said, adamant, explaining that on one flight a Japanese gentlemen had spent an hour in the loo. Concerned, she had forced open the door only to find that he had taped a Playboy centrefold to the mirror and was masturbating with considerable enthusiasm.

Ms. Marois's taste in state-of-the-art toilet fixtures notwithstanding, I should point out that those that flush noisily do have their uses.

At a party I once attended when I was still a randy teenager, I can remember retreating to the nearest loo to neck with a girl I had fancied ever since we had danced close to Stardust at a Friday afternoon Tea Dance in the Barron Byng High School gym. Because she is now happily married, a grandmother, as well as a legendary United Jewish Appeal fundraiser, I will not compromise Debbie by mentioning her name here. However, I do remember breaking free from time to time to reach over and flush the noisy toilet lest others, already rattling the doorknob, suspected I was locked in a more serendipitous activity than was usually the case in that cubicle.

MORDECAI RICHLER

Ms. Marois is much on my mind. Why, only the other night, I suffered a nightmare that involved our health minister. She was at a dinner party in one of those rare Montreal homes where French was not threatened, as it is on our city streets, and was in desperate need of a tinkle. But she was aware that her hostess's toilet was one of those noisy old-fashioned ones.

What does such a fastidious woman do?

Hold it in?

Risk the noisy flushing, which would betray what her business was in there, the other guests at the table nudging each other, chanting, "Pauline's having a pee"?

Or does the health minister reach for her cell phone, summon her chauffeur and a motorcycle escort, and race to her very own discreet facility?

I have no idea, because I wakened in a cold sweat before the conundrum could be resolved.

However, I would like to apologize for the vicious attacks Ms. Marois has endured in the anglophone press, as well as radio call-in shows, surely an unnecessary embarrassment, impinging on her dignity. As Pierre Bourgault noted in Le Journal de Montreal, "The minister of health administers an annual budget of $13 billion; she has tens of thousands of employees; she works at least twice as hard as most of us; the responsibilities she assumes willingly would crush most of us in an instant. She is subjected to a daily barrage of abuse, and still manages to get up in the morning. If she's not entitled to a silent toilet, well, by God, who is?"

He might have added that the $800,000 or so she has requisitioned to refurbish her offices in Montreal and Quebec City is in mere Canadian bucks. Furthermore, she has not asked for a sauna, or gold-plated taps, as do so many African dictators. And her request for an office for her chauffeur reveals a touching concern for those who do not work so hard so she does: say, all those money-crazed nurses.

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